

Gentlemen & Players (Joanne Harris)

Spoiler Alert!

Loved it. What a delightfully psychopathic anti-hero. Nicely balanced by the old-school gentleman, Roy.

No, I didn't guess the Big Twist. But oddly I had been thinking all the way through that our protagonist did not come over as very convincingly male. I had it in mind to take points off Joanne Harris for being bad at blokes. Fair dos, I was conned, right enough. Perhaps an aficionado of who-dun-its would not have been so misled by the red herrings.

It did remind me of something. It took me until about page 200 to realise what - namely *Titus Groan*. Our androgynous anti-hero is, of course, Steerpike - who I always thought came over as hermaphroditic in *Titus*. St Oswald's is a perfect replica in miniature of Gormenghast. Both are creepy Gothic forests of cold stone. Both are replete with traditions whose only purpose is to perpetuate themselves. Both have archaic 'high priests' whose calling is to facilitate that perpetuation.

Roy Straitley is a mixture of Flay and Barquentine. Flay exposed the machinations of Steerpike as Straitley exposed Julia/Julian. Barquentine was the hermetic upholder of tradition and respecter of no one, not even Sepulchre, Lord of Groan. This echos Straitley's relationship with The Head and the other 'suits'. Straitley's boss is given the nickname Sourgrape - Barquentine's father was Sourdust. Naughty, naughty, Joanne Harris. She even mentions Gormenghast in the text, taunting us with clues to her plagiarism. Well, not plagiarism. There are, after all, only seven plots, so authors must needs re-use them. And the plot actually evolves very differently, the similarities are limited.

Nevertheless, John Snyder is surely Swelter - greasy, fat, abusive, stupid - from whom Steerpike (Julia/Julian) successfully flees into the heart of Gormenghast (St Oswalds), there to initiate his (her) career as covert destroyer. Pat Bishop is, I suppose, Dr Prunesquallor, the decent chap, trying to hold things together, quite bright but somehow missing what's really going on. The nearest I can get to Leon is Lady Fuchsia. Here the analogy may be stretched too thin. However, Steerpike's attentions are unwanted by Lady Fuchsia, just as Pinchbeck is an annoyance to Leon. And if Steerpike has become a girl, then I suppose Lady Fuchsia must become a boy.

The title is great. It evokes an era and also precisely reflects the class division of that era. The school is populated with delightful caricatures and gargoyles (not at all like real teachers, I'm sure - though Harris should know, having been one). I enjoyed the deflating of the right-on League of Nations, the colour-coordinated couple. And we all heartily approve, don't we, of Straitley's refusal to kowtow to political correctness, his rejection of all things modern and his steadfast adherence to his age-old standards? Or is it just me? We *are* pleased he survives, though, aren't we?

I approve of the ending in which our wicked Julia is free. Free, no doubt, to plot again to inflict her crushing malice on some other poor souls.

Score: 7.5 out of 10.